

Broken?

Rev. Joe Connolly

“To sum this up, then: just as a single trespass, a single offense, brought condemnation to all, a single righteous act brought to all acquittal and, therefore, brought to all life.” — Romans 5:18.

Well, as you heard earlier, it is the Season of Lent. Now, many of you know I grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition.

Perhaps as a consequence of that when I was young the changing seasons of the church were quite familiar to me, especially this season—Lent. I think Lent is fixed in my memory because of the traditional Roman practices throughout Lent.

In the Roman Church there are two common practices in which one engages— the discipline of fast and the discipline of abstinence. For those unfamiliar with these terms, abstinence means one abstains from eating meat, does not eat meat at specific times. Fish yes, meat no— and if you sell seafood that sounds good; if you’re a butcher, not so much.

Fasting, on the other hand, is what it sounds like. One does not eat. But fasting, in the ways employed in the Lent tradition, does not mean one fails to eat anything. It does mean one strives to limit the amount one eats.

Fasting as a practice during Lent usually consists of consuming two smaller meals— probably breakfast and lunch. Then you get to have a regular third meal in the evening. You also have the option of switching it around and eating a large meal at mid-day, just so long as you ease off in the evening.

However— and this is, I think, where the practice of fasting might have a large impact on your personal habits— this particular discipline of fasting means one should consume nothing between meals— no snacks, no candy. This, of course, is said by the pastor whose church always has a jar of candy sitting in the office tempting anyone, even during Lent.

Now, as I indicated, Lent was distinctive for me when I was young. One reason for that might be the rules recommended now are not quite the same rules recommended when I was young. They changed in 1966.

In our time the prescribed days on which the rules say one should both fast and abstain are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday— that’s really it. The rules also say one should practice abstinence every Friday during Lent.

When I was a child the rules were more— I guess the word I’d use here is stringent— the rules were more stringent. One was expected to fast for all of Lent, excluding Sundays. Sundays were and are considered feast days, holy days, therefore days on which fasting and abstinence were and are not required. Back then— and not many people know this because the rule was widely ignored— one was supposed to abstain from meat not just on Friday but on Saturday also. [1]

That brings me to the topic of rule breaking. Rule breaking is sometimes done with permission and sometimes done without permission.

After all, so many people simply ignored the Saturday abstinence rule back then that most people did not even know it existed— an example of rule breaking without permission. But there is one major example of rule breaking done with permission during Lent.

This rule breaking with permission was done especially by those of us who did not just grow up Catholic but grew up Catholic and Irish and not just those of us who grew up not just Catholic and Irish but grew up Catholic and Irish and lived in New York City. I'm an Irish Catholic New Yorker. That makes me a triple threat.

This rule breaking with permission was done by all Irish Catholic New Yorkers. And the rule breaking done with permission is called Saint Patrick's Day.

You see, falling as it does on March 17th, there is no way Saint Patrick's Day ever falls outside of Lent. And observing a fast on Saint Patrick's Day is hard enough.

But what do you do if Saint Patrick's Day happens to fall on a Friday when you're supposed to abstain from meat also? Do you bless some fish and eat it and hope it's going to taste like Corned Beef? Faith and *begorra*, no!

That's where the good Bishops of New York City came into play. On Saint Patrick's Day they offered a dispensation from the rules. Therefore, no good Irish Catholic New Yorker ever had to observe any of these rules on Saint Patrick's Day no matter which day of the week it was because the Bishops suspended the rules for the day.

Of course, no good Irish Catholic New Yorker would have ever observed these rules on Saint Patrick's Day anyway, no matter what any Bishop said. And that's probably the real reason the Bishops offered a dispensation in the first place. (Slight pause.)

We hear these words in the work know as Romans: "To sum this up, then: just as a single trespass, a single offense, brought condemnation to all, a single righteous act brought to all acquittal and, therefore, brought to all life." (Slight pause.)

Maren Tirabassi is a United Church of Christ pastor and a well known poet. She occasionally posts poems of other poets on her web site. This poem posted by Maren is by Katherine Burgess. The poem is described as an evening prayer and described as a prayer for Lent and it is based on the Beatitudes. (Slight pause.)

"I bless the emptiness in our hearts, / Because that leaves a space for God to enter in. / I bless the things in us that touch other people gently, / Because gentleness is the way to reach another."

"I bless the sadness that sometimes overwhelms us, / Because that will lead others to comfort us. / I bless our yearning for the truth, / Because it can be satisfied in Jesus, the Christ."

"I bless the mercy and forgiveness that we show others, / Because it reflects God's mercy and forgiveness / That is extended to us every single day. / I bless the childlike purity in all of our hearts, / For we must become like little children / To see the face of God."

"I bless you when you are a peacemaker / And grant you God's peace which passes all understanding. / I bless you in a time of persecution, / For Jesus was... persecuted. / And you will be with Jesus in the dominion of heaven."

"I bless us with a good sleep / And a peaceful rest / So that tomorrow / We can continue / With God's work. / Amen." [2] (Slight pause.)

When the reading from Romans was introduced it was said the writings of Paul can be quite convoluted and that

Paul addresses sin, death, the law, the Christ— all in several sentences. I think a key to understanding both Paul and the Letter to the Church in Rome is this simple message: Christ overcomes and even overwhelms the law. Christ overcomes and even overwhelms the rules. Christ overcomes and even overwhelms legalism.

A good Irish Catholic New Yorker would put this way: Christ is our dispensation. Put in a more traditional, simple way, Jesus loves us. And what does the law, any law, any rule, any fast, any abstinence, have to do with the law called love? (Slight pause.)

That thought brings me back to the final words of the poem by Katherine Burgess. “I bless us with a good sleep / And a peaceful rest / So that tomorrow / We can continue / With God’s work.” (Slight pause.)

You see Lent is not about giving anything up. Lent is not about staying within the rules. Lent is not about the law.

Lent is about living out from the law. Lent is about tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow after that continuing with God’s work, doing God’s work.

Lent, you see, is not about sacrifice of any kind and not about broken-ness of any kind. We may not be perfect but we are not broken. Christ fixed everything that needed to be fixed so we are not broken. We are all in working order. And the work we need to be about is the work of God.

And what is the work of God? These words and ideas are also from the poem by Katherine Burgess and very much address what we need to do, the work we need to do, in the Season of Lent.

Leave a space for God to enter in. Be gentle. Have a yearning for the truth. Show others mercy and forgiveness.

Seek and see the face of God. Make peace, because the peace of God does pass all understanding. (Slight pause.)

Everything in that list addresses the work of God. And nothing in that list is about rules.

This is about living out from the law, living out from the rules. And that is, perhaps, both the real work and the real challenge of Lent: doing the work of God by living out from the law. Amen.

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “A clergy colleague recently said if you really, really, really want to give something up for Lent you can. Give up racism, homophobia, fear, sexism, pride, greed, worry, doubt, violence of all kinds— my friends list went on and on. Yes, there is a lot we can give up, from which we might and should abstain. But let’s think about and concentrate on what we can do because I think there is a lot we can do.”

BENEDICTION: Let us learn as faithful disciples of Christ. Let us know that God is available to us at any time and in any place. Let us give thanks for the grace of God in Christ, Jesus. Let us trust in God for all time and for all eternity. And may we love God so much, that we love nothing else too much. May we be so in awe of God that we are in awe of no one and nothing else. Amen.

[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lent>

[2] For the purpose of this manuscript I broke these words into paragraphs. There are no paragraphs in the original poem. There are only line breaks which are shown.

<https://giftsinopenhands.wordpress.com/2017/02/28/evening-prayer-for-lent/>